

Lasallian Commencement Address

May 1996

Presented by: Sharon O'Connell

Members of the Board of Trustees, Br. James, Members of the Faculty, Administrators, Family, Friends, and most especially, my fellow graduates.

I'd like to begin by pointing out that this ceremony celebrates elements that are both very new and very old. Sitting in this brand new recreation facility, we are reminded of Lewis' growth, potential and future. Dressed in these rather peculiar costumes, long black gowns and pointy boards with swaying tassels for hats, we experience traditions which have long celebrated the completion of academic programs.

Each of us is also celebrating new and old elements in our own lives. None of us is exactly the same as that first day we came to this University to earn a Bachelor's or Master's degree. Yet there is much within each of us that has held steady throughout the years. In being here today we announce to the world that we have cherished an education based upon solid values. Not all of us can name those values precisely, but we know they have been operating in our lives.

I have identified them with the Lasallian values of faith, knowledge, fidelity, wisdom, justice and association. And I can best speak of these values through personal experience. While I reflect on these values alive in my life, I invite you to reflect on the impact these values have had on your own life.

As I look out on the 450 individuals who make up the graduating class of 1996, I see many friends made during these past four years. I shared so many laughs, tears, hopes and fears with them. They were there when I took on a double major and a minor. They were there when my life as a Resident Assistant seemed almost unbearable. They were there as we tried to re-create the student government system.

They were there during exams and papers and big career decisions. They have been with me in the last few weeks as my career plans shifted and as I was rewarded with the challenge of creating this address. Thank you all for helping me keep my head above water when I thought I would drown. And thank you for helping me celebrate the moments when I felt confident and happy with the life I have chosen.

At the same time, standing up here I can see many whom I do not know. Many are commuters who come to Romeoville only at night or rush on to campus between job or family obligations. Some of you have never been to Romeoville before today or have seen the main campus only a few times. You are Lewis Flyers at Schaumburg, Hickory Hills, St. Patricks, Naperville, Orland Park, Oglesby or Oakbrook. Some here are of a "traditional" age for graduation from college, for others graduation comes at another, later point, in their lives. For some of us this is the beginning of our adult lives. For others, especially those in the midst of raising families or changing careers, this is another in a series of adult moments.

Still, we all share many of the same experiences: family and friends who supported us, moments of triumph, moments of pain, moments when it was all working, and moments when nothing was working. For all of us Lewis has made a difference.

We might have shared a cheer for our Lewis basketball or volleyballs teams. We might have shared tears at a Koinonia Retreat. We might have traveled together into the hills of Appalachia or to the East Side of Joliet to help some of America's poorest people. We might have shared a class where Dr. Miller led us out of the darkness of a cave, or where Dr. Hill absolutely convinced us that the economy was a baffling thing, or where Dr. Gaziano persuaded us that despite the apparent confusion, the government of the United States does make some sense, or where Professor Baldwin took a limited high school religious perspective and by using careful analysis provided a basis for an adult faith. We might have shared a lunch with Professor Houlihan who noticed that we were among the last left in the cafeteria. We might have gone to Br. Bob Murphy or Donna Quathamers for help in a moment when everything was falling apart.

Life is experiences like these which have taught me the meaning of Lewis' Lasallian values: faith, knowledge, fidelity, wisdom, justice, and association. These values have well been made real for me by friends, family, professors and mentors.

There are others who were very important to us, but they are not here today- at least not in body. I probably would not be standing here about to receive my Bachelors of Arts in History without the urging of my grandpa O'Connell whose love of history and whose support for my desire to work with the law were instrumental. He passed away in 1993. Of course, I feel his spirit within, but I wish I could wrap my arms around him and say: "I made it." In the last several years many of us have struggled through similar personal trials: the death of a loved one, a broken relationship, the fading of a dream, sacrifices in time, money, leisure and sleep.

But now we are here in a moment of celebration. Today we are not only college graduates, more significantly, we are Lewis graduates. The lessons from our text books have been complemented in those who have urged us to be caring persons, committed to the improvement of the world. We, the members of this graduating class, will serve the world as nurses, teachers, pilots, lawyers, mechanics, police officers, professors, researchers, doctors, business persons and much more. We take different roads but our journey is joined in the Lasallian values of this university which challenge us to be compassionate and caring persons.

So congratulations to us all: graduates and all who have supported us on the road thus far. Let us continue to make our families proud, let us continue to be signs of the valued education we received at Lewis, let us continue to honor a tradition of faith that asks us to act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with our god.